

Neighborhood Effects

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Definition: Neighborhood effects are a process of local influence, whereby the characteristics of people's local social milieus are believed to influence the way in which they think and act. Neighbors present individuals with models of attitudes and behavioral patterns, which may conform to their own, and thus reinforce their self-identity, but alternatively may contradict them and thus influence some, although not necessarily all, to modify their own attitudes and behavior in order to be consistent with those of their local peer groups (Johnson, 1994).

The neighborhood effect has been used to account for certain geographical patterns – of attitudes towards educational achievement, for example, and of voting – with indicate greater spatial concentration of a certain attitude than anticipated from knowledge of the characteristics of an area's residents alone. The inference drawn from the ecological relationships identified, but rarely tested (thus potentially committing an ecological fallacy), is that people initially predisposed to a minority view within an area will be influenced by the majority opinion there. Belief in the operation of a neighborhood effect stimulated proposals for balanced neighborhoods in the planning of urban residential areas, in a form of social engineering (Johnson, 1994).

Application: Neighborhood effects are studied in a variety of different substantive areas. Examples of these applications can be seen in the following excerpts from articles exploring neighborhood effects:

“This study tests for the existence of neighborhood effects on educational attainment among some 2,500 young people who left school between 1984 and 1986 in one education authority (school district) in Scotland. It... uses hierarchical linear regression modeling to test for neighborhood effects and to estimate the contribution of neighborhood deprivation to any effects... the authors find a significant negative association between deprivation in the home neighborhood and educational attainment. The findings suggest that policies to alleviate educational disadvantage cannot be focused solely on schooling, but must form part of a broader initiative to tackle social deprivation in the society at large,” (Garner and Raudenbush, 1991).

“This study sought to examine relationships between neighborhood socioeconomic characteristics and birthweight, accounting for individual socioeconomic characteristics, among 5 ethnic groups. No consistent relationship between neighborhood socioeconomic characteristics and birthweight was found among Whites, US-born Latinas, or foreign-born Latinas overall, but birthweight increased with less-favorable neighborhood socioeconomic characteristics among foreign-born Latinas in high-poverty or high-unemployment neighborhoods. These findings were not explained by measured behavioral or cultural factors. In addition to individual socioeconomic characteristics, living in neighborhoods that are less socioeconomically advantaged may differentially influence birthweight, depending on women's ethnicity and nativity,” (Pearl, et al., 2001).

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